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Developing writing skills in the classroom: A corpus-based analysis of multi-genre structures

Ricardo Casañ-Pitarch*, José Ramón Calvo-Ferrer

UCAM Universidad Católica de Murcia, Campus de los Jerónimos s/n E-30107, Guadalupe, Murcia, Spain

Abstract

This paper introduces a pedagogical proposal for the development of writing skills based on the analysis of multi-genre structures (AMS). The objective of this AMS model is to help teachers design genres that may be used in the language classroom. This genre analysis can be performed with software tools for corpus analysis. This study is based on a previous model of genre analysis designed to determine the forms of the macrostructure, microstructure, and the format of the target genre (Casañ-Pitarch, 2015) and focuses on ESP students at tertiary education. The AMS model is expected to help students improve their writing skills and gain specific knowledge on professional and academic genres.

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1. Introduction

Genres are generally studied under analytical and professional perspectives. However, the study of genres can also be used to achieve pedagogical goals in language teaching (Bhatia, 2002; Biber, Connor, & Upton, 2007; Cortes, 2011; Wingate & Tribble, 2012). Writing for academic and professional purposes as well as for scholarly publications is often challenging for novice writers. Some students may find difficulties when they face the study of new genres and fail to recognize their communicative purpose, structures and linguistic rules. Cortes (2011) suggests

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +34 968 278 893; fax: +34 968 278 645.

E-mail address: rcasan@ucam.edu

that one of the main reasons behind this type of problems are related to the lack of formal training on academic writing or to the nature of traditional writing classes. This research focuses on helping teachers design genres through corpus analysis and it also suggests a pedagogical application based on our model of genre analysis. This application is aimed at students of ESP, and it is based on the creation of genres following certain parameters introduced by the teacher concerning the type of morphology, language, contents, tenses, structures and format, among other elements. This proposal should enable teachers to analyze and design specific genres following the method presented in this paper as well as applying them into the classroom. The justification of this research is based on the premise that this model of analysis may enhance the study of genres adapted to any particular field. Consequently, teachers will be able to elaborate their own didactic materials according to their needs. This paper offers a general view on genre analysis and the use of corpus linguistics software tools, after which a review of pedagogical applications on genre analysis follows. Then, a model of genre analysis is introduced, and a proposal of pedagogical applications related to our model of analysis is suggested for writing academic and professional documents based on specific genres.

2. Genre analysis

In recent decades, society communication needs have made genre analysis become a focus of study in language teaching (Bhatia, 1993; Dudley-Evans, 1986; Swales, 1990). Genre analysis is defined as a multi-disciplinary task which involves different areas in the study of languages such as linguistics, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, translation, and advertising, among others. These studies focus on what people do with language in specific situations and contexts. In this sense, genre analysis can be defined as the study of situated linguistic behavior (Bhatia, 1993; Swales, 1990). Following Bhatia (2004:5), these types of generic studies are often defined as 'Generic Potential,' as they enable communicators 'to make appropriate decisions as to the choice of lexicon-grammatical as well as generic resources to respond to familiar and not so familiar rhetorical situations.' Thus, the main purpose of this type of linguistic research is to reproduce discourse forms, showing a simplified view of the world and explaining why different specific discourse communities use the type of language the way they do. Thus, genre analysis can provide versatile and dynamic applications, with an explanatory vision, a specific focus with a broad vision, which also allows for continuous innovation and exploitation of documents and genres. Genre analysis has become a social need to understand and reproduce texts for specific purposes. Although genres are identified in the basis of conventionalized features, they are constantly developing and require continuous research (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). Furthermore, genres usually get mixed, giving rise to hybrid forms. This implies that individuals need to design their own genres, adapting them to individual needs for private exploitation (Bhatia, 1993, 1995). As a result, society communication needs have made genre analysis become necessary to justify discursive practices and fulfill institutional and disciplinary goals in specific contexts.

3. The use of corpora in genre analysis

The analysis of language enables researchers to identify patterns of forms and use in particular genres and areas of language that are difficult to perceive (Bhatia, 2004). Nowadays, most research on the analysis of language is carried out with computational analysis tools based on corpus studies. In this sense, the use of corpora is a great help for the development of genre analysis (Sobel, 2013). The function of any linguistic corpus is to complete linguistic analyses with actual data. Working with corpus tends to be used in the research field, focusing on several linguistic features and allowing the researcher to discover interesting new insights about the language (Nesselhauf, 2005). A corpus is defined as a systematic collection of texts, which can be written or spoken, and can be stored on a computer (Fillmore, 1992; O'Keefe et al, 2007). In this sense, corpora can show the exact composition of the text, showing data about word frequency, grammar, vocabulary, relational language, idioms, and chunks (Nesselhauf, 2005). The computerization of corpora has reduced drastically the time required to find particular words or phrases in texts and guarantees the highest degree of accuracy. Furthermore, the current technology of these software tools allows the user to study a wider range of patterns and collocation of words as well as the relevance of single words and their frequency. Corpora also permit multiple analyses at the same time, including the study of semantics or

morphology. From a pedagogical perspective, corpora facilitate the study of languages by showing the real uses of the language rather than artificial situations (Braun, 2005).

Since the early decades of the XXI century there have been significant advances in the development of software and tools for language analysis. In this sense there are different types of corpora referring to the analysis of both oral and written forms. Nesselhauf (2005) identifies two categories – orthographic and annotated corpora. Orthographic systems (*Wordsmith*, *MonoConc Pro*) are used to extract word frequency, grammar, vocabulary, and quantifications of words, sentences and paragraphs (Nesselhauf, 2005). The results obtained from the analysis of texts may show the amounts of these strings occurring in the corpus, placing and highlighting them in the part of the text in which they were found in a real context (Alvarez-Rodriguez, 2006). On the other hand, annotated corpora (*Tropes*, *Brat*, *Wordnet*) analyze texts in terms of morphology and semantics. Annotated corpora bring up the qualitative and quantitative data necessary to carry out research on genre analysis. For example, the software *Tropes* performs statistical analysis on the frequency of main word categories, statistics on the co-occurrence and the connection rate of semantic fields and word categories, probabilistic analyses of words occurring in bundles, geometric analyses of the bundles delimiting episodes in the body of a text, histograms of the text with the correspondent frequency distribution, and cognitive-discursive analyses, making it possible to detect the most characteristic parts of the text (Lema, 2012). Despite orthographic and annotated corpora offer several possibilities and can be highly reliable, it is necessary to keep in mind that there are certain limitations. According to Giannoni (2011), linguistic corpora cannot explain the reasons for the use of the language – for example, it cannot explain why a particular word is used more often than others or the reasons for that word choice. Similarly, results from corpora do not represent the entire language, but a part of it. Therefore, it is highly recommended that corpus analysis be conducted by software and supervised by man.

4. Bhatia's model of genre analysis

Several models of genre analysis have been proposed (Bhatia, 1993; Killingsworth & Gilbertson, 1992; Lassen, 2003; Swales, 1990) – among these, Bhatia's model (1993), who proposed a schematic structure of moves and steps, is of special relevance. Swales (1990) had previously defined moves as parts of a text which serve a particular communicative purpose within the text. In addition, moves are formed by steps, which are minor constituent elements. According to Inger and Nielsen (2005), these categories can be divided into text-internal and text-external. Among the seven steps, only point six is strictly text-internal, the remaining points are text-external. However, research on genres is not linear – it is in fact interdependent, complex, multidisciplinary and hierarchical in structure. Thus, internal and external textual factors are involved in the process of analyzing the seven stages.

The first step in Bhatia's model, 'placing the given genre-text in a situational context,' consists in placing a genre text in a situational context. This part of the analysis is completed according to the knowledge and experience of the researcher – the more knowledgeable and experienced the researcher, the easier to determine the discipline and features of the genre analyzed. The second step, 'surveying existing literature,' is related to the analysis of existing literature about the genre selected for the study. This material can be previous linguistic analyses of the genre, guide books, or formal and informal discussions of the structure of the text considering social and historical factors. The third step, 'refining contextual analysis,' suggests it is necessary to determine the situational analysis with precision. For this objective, it is necessary to review, analyze, and compare relevant elements such as the speaker or writer and the audience, the historical and socio-cultural context, other texts related to the genre, and the topic or aim the document is representing. The fourth step, 'selecting corpus,' addresses the choice of the corpus. Bhatia (1993) suggests three aspects a researcher needs to consider when designing the corpus. Firstly, it is necessary to define the genre and other sub-genres in order to make possible the distinction among types. Secondly, the researcher must state the criteria to determine which texts belong to the genre. And thirdly, the researcher can determine the criteria to select the corpus for their specific purposes. The fifth step, 'textual, intertextual and interdiscursive perspective,' analyzes the system in which the genre is used, as well as the rules regarding the use of language within the genre. At this stage, it is noticeable that these are usually understood and followed by the participants without previous

consciously learning, whereas other conventions are “explicit and enforced” (Bhatia 1993:24). The sixth step, ‘linguistic analysis’, focuses on the analysis of the most significant features of language and involves three levels:

- *Level 1: Lexicon-Grammatical Features.* This analysis provides empirical evidence to confirm or disprove the use of certain words in the target genre. This level aims at studying the grammatical features and any specific features of language common to the genre. This analysis is statistical and it requires a relatively large corpus. This type of analysis is limited since it cannot explain the use of certain words, and how these are involved in the process of communication.
- *Level 2: Text patterning.* The second level focuses on the language strategies, which specify how the members of a community give specific values to the language use. This may involve the study of lexicon, syntax or discourse in any particular genre. In other words, the aim of this level is to describe the choice of certain language forms.
- *Level 3: Structural interpretation of the text genre.* The third level focuses on the analysis of the structure and organization of the target genre. As defined above by Swales (1990), moves are part of the text with particular communicative purposes, and these are divided into steps. In this sense, each move has a particular communicative intention subordinate to the general communicative purpose.

The seventh step, ‘studying institutional context,’ suggests considering double-checking with a specialist to guarantee that the genre developed is relevant for the target audience. This person should be competent in the target culture in which the genre is used and should also be a language specialist to explain specific details.

5. Model for the analysis of multi-genre structures (AMS)

In order to accomplish the first aim of this research, a model for the analysis of multi-genre structures (AMS) has been designed in order to identify and determine the specific parts of the target genre. The AMS model analyzes the forms of the language and is divided into three broad sections: macrostructure, microstructure, and format. Table 1 shows the different categories that are taken into account for our genre analysis proposal.

5.1. Macrostructure

The analysis of the macrostructure consists in the study of the major structures and forms in the texts analyzed. It is referred to major structures as the choice of genres, the quantification of forms and structures, and the available moves and steps. The first step in the analysis is to determine the available moves and steps in the genre analyzed. In this case, the different moves and steps must be chosen individually and decide which ones are necessary according to the results. The decision about which ones are necessary is taken after obtaining and comparing results regarding their use. Once the main moves are determined, the next stage consists in dividing them into steps. After establishing the moves and steps, it is necessary to quantify the forms and structures of the different paragraphs, sentences and words. In this sense, we should determine the amount of words per sentence, the amount of words per paragraph, the amount of sentences per paragraph, and the amount of paragraphs per text, as well as estimating the amount of headlines necessary in each step. It is advised to use the *Wordsmith* software to complete this analysis. Then, by calculating the mean, median, mode, and usual range, the researcher can choose the suitable form for each step in terms of paragraphs, sentences, and words. The analysis of the macrostructure is essential in order to set the basis and the main forms of the target genre. With this part of the study, the general structure of the target genre can be visualized before analyzing the different elements of the microstructure in detail.

5.2. Microstructure

The analysis of the microstructure focuses on determining the type of language used in each document, as well as morphology, terminology, formality and verbal tenses. First, it is necessary to focus on analyzing the type of language. This can be informative, persuasive, or promotional, depending on the main purpose of the text (O’Hair et al., 2004). In order to classify the type of language it is necessary to study in detail the purpose of each sentence, paragraph or the whole document. The collection of this information will be the basis to determine the appropriate

type of language in each step. Secondly, regarding the morphological composition of the documents analyzed, the software *Tropes* (Molette & Landré, 2011) should be considered. This software quantifies words in groups of nouns, verbs, adjectives, connectors, modalities and pronouns; and it also provides a percentage of these values. Thirdly, the verbal composition of this model is determined after a classification of these into groups according to their tense, aspect, modality, and voice (Downing, 2014). At last, in order to determine the level of formality of these texts, we suggest the formula presented by Heylighen and Dewaele (1999), which is based on word classes:

$$F = (\text{noun freq.} + \text{adjective freq.} + \text{preposition freq.} + \text{article freq.} - \text{pronoun freq.} - \text{verb freq.} - \text{adverb freq.} - \text{interjection freq.} + 100)/2$$

Placing together the results of the macrostructure and the microstructure, the necessary data to create the standard model of the genre can be obtained. The percentage of each morphological category is based on the results that have been previously obtained in the morphological analysis. Besides, we suggest proving the validity of these results with a sample of the target genre and get a specialist to check it (Bhatia, 1993). It should include all the steps and moves that are considered compulsory and optional according to the criteria that had been established, and the language used should follow the standard parameters obtained from the analysis of the results.

5.3. Format

Concerning the analysis of the format, this study focuses on different aspects. Among the different parts of the texts analyzed, this study includes a focus on the format of the font type, font size, font color, line spacing, text alignment, background color, and word emphasis. The study of format is used to determine the aspect of the document in case this was digital. In order to analyze the font type, font size, and the line spacing it is necessary to count details individually in order to obtain reliable data to establish suitable criteria for each section. On the other hand, there is also a focus on the collection of data in order to establish the standard criteria for the font color, background color, and word emphasis; this part of the study also needs to be completed individually. In this sense, in order to determine the font color it is necessary to consider the type of color in the main text as well as the possible different colors in headlines or other parts of the text. Concerning background color, this category must be divided into primary, and secondary colors. Primary colors are the main ones in the electronic document. Secondary colors are the ones available in graphs or charts, among others. It is necessary to point out that it might be possible to find more than one secondary color in the same document; despite this is not advisable (Wilder, 2008). Finally, word emphasis concerns the fact that some words, sentences or parts of the texts could be bold, underlined, or italics. These results together should allow the analyst to determine the format of the genre. The successful application of the established standard parameters concerning format will be determinant in the appearance of the document.

5.4. Comparison with Bhatia's model (1993)

As it can be observed, there are some differences between our model and Bhatia's (1993). Firstly, he suggests placing texts in a situational context, whereas our model is the opposite way round: any situational context requires suitable texts. In this sense, it is suggested that teachers and students have the need of teaching and/or studying before selecting suitable texts, which must be adapted to the objectives of the research or the course. Regarding the stages from two to five, these are also included in the model presented in this paper. Both models recognize the need to get familiarized with the given genres and the text forming it. On the other hand, this model differs in the way the linguistic analysis is implemented. Whereas Bhatia proposes an analysis going from minor elements to major ones, we suggest focusing first on the major items (macro-structure) and then moving towards more specific ones (micro-structure). Regarding the structural interpretation of the text genre, it can be observed that both models focus on the cognitive aspects of language organization. In this sense, the communicative aim of genres is realized through rhetorical moves. Each move is used as a communicative intention. Concerning lexicon-grammatical features and text-patterning, our model has combined them into the same category: microstructure. Bhatia (1993: 25) states that these types of analysis are statistical and provide evidences to confirm certain linguistic features. In reference to the contextualization of these forms, here lies another difference between both models. Whereas Bhatia suggests

analyzing phrases, our model is based on the morphological construction of the sentences. This option has been taken because the software *Tropes* offers the completion of this task automatically. At last, the two models suggest discussing the results obtained with a specialist. Both models contain similarities and differences. However none of these should be considered incompatible. In fact, these models of genre analysis are flexible and each item is analyzed and discussed individually considering individual or collective needs.

Table 1. Model for the analysis of multi-genre structures (AMS).

Macrostructure	Moves and steps forming the genre
	Quantification of forms and structures*
Microstructure	Type of language
	Morphology*
	Forms of morphological elements*
	Terminology*
	Formality*
	Verbal analysis
Format	Font type
	Font size
	Line spacing
	Font color
	Background color
	Font spacing

* These elements admit electronic analysis.

6. Pedagogical applications in genre analysis

The use of genre analysis in the classroom is a possibility that some authors have previously considered (Bhatia, 1993; Crossley, 2008; Swales, 1991; Upton, 2002). In the area of language teaching, genre analysis could have important implications for the teaching of ESP since it may promote the elaboration of specific documents as well as increasing students' awareness of written structures, enhance their pragmatic development, and help students to avoid communication mistakes with real contextualized models (Pintos dos Santos, 2002). Some benefits of this proposal are discussed in Hyland (2012). He appoints that genre-based teaching helps learners to engage in critical thinking when they encounter the discourse. Consequently, the proposal shown in this paper encourages students to work with a real purpose rather than artificial ones, as it may happen in some traditional writing courses. In this sense, Hyland (2012) specifies that teachers must focus on providing students with the linguistic resources they may need in order to express themselves effectively. As result, genre instruction contextualizes genres to particular cultures, with specific syntactic structures, vocabulary, and any other language forms, as well as assisting students to learn and exploit real society's discourse structures. Students are benefited of a process of learning with the application of language, content, and contexts at the same time (Martin, 1992). Additionally, Hyland (2012) also lists other advantages of applying genre pedagogies into the classroom:

- *Explicitness* shows what is to be learnt to facilitate the acquisition of writing skills.
- *Systematic process*: coherent framework to focus on both language and contexts.
- *Needs analysis*: course objectives and content are derived from students' needs.
- *Support*: teachers' central role in scaffolding students' learning and creativity.
- *Empowering skills*: access to the patterns and possibilities of variation in texts.
- *Critical knowledge*: resources for students to understand valued discourses.
- *Consciousness-raising awareness*: Increases teachers' awareness of texts to confidently advice students on writing.

Other authors suggest different reasons to apply genre-based teaching in writing courses. For example, Fairclough (2013) and Rahman (2011) suggest that genre features have rhetorical and argumentative constructions of the text and it takes tasks beyond the courses, giving a sense of reality and stimulating students in their learning process. Bhatia (1993) justified the implementation of genre-based teaching because it gives more freedom in the teaching and learning processes, stimulating critical thinking. In other words, genre-based language instruction shows how target texts are structured and why they are written in those ways. In this case, this plan suggests that the teacher or lecturer analyzes the text and explain the main features of each genre to the students, and then the students could take these instructions to enhance writing skills. As stated in the previous section, a model for the analysis of multi-genre structures has been developed and some possible pedagogical applications are suggested. The second aim of this research is to introduce a plan for the implementation of genre analysis into the classroom.

7. Proposed model for the development of writing skills

7.1. Introduction

This proposal suggests creating a writing course based on the study of genres and the subsequent composition of generic documents. It may happen that teachers are interested in teaching how to write a particular type of document but previous studies of genres are not precise enough according to the teachers' and learners' expectations, or they are simply not available. The AMS model suggests that teachers can create their own materials based on the analysis of different genres. With these materials teachers could provide their students with suitable documents and clear linguistic information of any particular genre. In these courses, the level of students is expected to be at least intermediate since the texts to be studied are specific or technical rather than general.

7.2. Objectives

The goal of this proposal is to elaborate real documents that permit students to understand and write professional and academic documents. This will reinforce and consolidate an intermediate-advanced level of linguistic competence in any particular area of study, developing the different sub-competences of which communicative competence is composed (linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic). Students will be able to communicate fluently and accurately as well as learning the most common structures and main features of the area on focus. With this model, teachers should be able to design personal material adapted to their students' needs.

7.3. Methodology

The study to be carried out is based on the need to develop materials to study a particular genre with materials adapted to the teachers' and students' needs after an analysis of corpus. With this purpose, teachers are in charge of determining the genres they want to teach, select suitable documents to create a corpus, and carry out their own research. Once teachers have obtained results, they will be able to understand the structure and the main forms of any given genre and teach what they consider relevant and necessary to their students. After designing the materials, we recommend following the traditional structure of ESP classes in which the teacher introduces an area of work or study with a special focus on the language and structures typically used in it. Then the whole group could work with the texts provided by the teacher with the aim of creating original texts following the parameters of each particular genre.

7.4. Skills achieved by the students

With the implementation of this course, it is expected that students achieve certain competences. Depending on the course and its objectives, these competences may vary. Students should be able to develop certain capacity for writing and to comprehend written discourse from different sources, as well as elaborating written texts from a variety of genres. Among other generic competences, students should develop their creativity for writing purposes,

capacity to solve problems, learn how to organize and plan ideas, and work autonomously or in groups. In the same way, students are expected to select appropriate strategies to construct meaning after reading a variety of texts for a variety of purposes and receive specific instructions and/or statistical data from the teacher. Students should also write effectively in a variety of genres, considering audience, context and purpose (Bhatia, 1993).

7.5. Implementation of this proposal

With the aim of explaining how to implement this proposal in the classroom, this section is divided into three stages: genre analysis, presentation of the genre into the classroom, and genre composition. The following section explain these three stages in detail based on the teacher's and the students' roles.

7.5.1. Genre analysis

Teacher's role: the first step in this proposal is the selection of a genre that the teacher wants to work with their students. In this case, it is the teacher's responsibility to find the linguistic and non-linguistic features that characterize each genre and establish a standard model. In this stage, the teacher is responsible for selecting the appropriate materials and design the sessions with the students. The analysis should be divided into three parts: macro-structure, micro-structure, and format.

Students' role: none (they do not participate in this stage).

7.5.2. Presentation of the genre into the classroom

Teacher's role: Once the teacher has designed the plan, this must be implemented in the classroom. The way each teacher presents and discusses the materials tends to differ widely, but this model of teaching should be similar to the one shown in a class of ESP. The teacher or instructor should show some models of the genre (reading) and present the typical language that characterizes each genre including grammar, vocabulary, expressions, and idioms, as well as the moves and steps, extension, or format.

Students' role: In the second stage the students are limited to listen to the teacher's instructions and discuss possible issues on the genre in focus.

7.5.3. Genre composition

Students' role: Students are the main protagonists in this stage. They are responsible for applying the theoretical knowledge and write a suitable sample. The aim of this stage is that the students can write samples of the target genre following the model of the genre presented by the teacher. This part of the work can be produced either individually or in groups; however it is highly desirable that once the students have written their documents, they should also read and exchange their papers with other classmates or do with the aim of comparing their work with the rest of the class. After the completion of their documents, a useful task would be peer review or the revision of the text created with the software 'Tropes' and 'Wordsmith' with the aim of comparing the text created with the original model provided by the teacher.

Teacher's role: The main responsibility of the teacher in this stage is to follow and give support to the students during the process of elaboration: giving advice, solving doubts, and assessing their work as well as providing students with the necessary feedback once the task is finished.

7.6. Assessment

The assessment of this task should be based on three main principles, despite it may vary according to the teachers' criteria, interests and needs. Firstly, students should have followed the teachers' instructions and the data provided, creating a piece of work according to these parameters. Secondly, the information given by the student should contain information relevant to the topic and avoid deviating this towards irrelevant ideas. And last, but not

least, the students should adapt their composition adequately to the context, audience and purpose, using the correct language and register. Additionally, teachers are free to add further criteria for the assessment of their students.

8. Discussion and conclusions

This paper introduces a pedagogical proposal for the development of writing skills based on the analysis of multi-genre structures (AMS). Previous literature suggests the use of genre analysis in the classroom as a real possibility for language teaching (Bhatia, 1993; Crossley, 2008; Swales, 1991; Upton, 2002). Furthermore, if genre analysis and ESP are combined, students will be trained to write specific documents, and subsequently this could increase their writing skills in contextualized documents (Pintos dos Santos, 2002). The proposed AMS model can be used as a tool for teachers to analyze specific genres with the aim of providing students with adapted didactic materials related to their interests and needs, and is intended for any type of written document in a specific context and provides teachers with a relevant model to create their own teaching materials. Students are expected to achieve certain skills such as understanding written discourse from different sources and elaborating different written texts from different genres. The AMS model is divided into three stages: macrostructure, microstructure, and format. Each of these analyses is divided into different items. Some of these items can be analyzed electronically, such as the quantification of forms and structures, morphology, terminology and formality. Unfortunately, we have not been able to find suitable software that may electronically analyze type of language, moves and steps, verb tenses, and format. This fact proves the need to further research in the area of corpus linguistics software, which makes the analysis of genres easier. Besides, the AMS model has not been implemented in the classroom yet, so its applicability calls for further research. As already mentioned, we believe that the implementation of the AMS model will make students gain the necessary knowledge and skills in order to develop documents based on the study of genres.

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